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Pakistan Near Entry Into Atomic Club

In the furor over Afghanistan and the Soviet threat to neighboring Pakistan, the American intelligence community is carefully monitoring what could be another jolt to peace in the Middle East — the imminent development of a nuclear bomb by Pakistan.

Recent top-secret intelligence reports predict the Pakistanis — who scorned the offer of conventional U.S. military weapons as "peanuts" — may explode their first atomic device by the end of the year. Asian and European intelligence sources, who have shared their information with the United States, are convinced of the Pakistanis' early success in achieving nuclear capability.

The prevailing view among U.S. analysts, chiefly the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, is that the Pakistanis would not perfect a nuclear bomb before the summer of 1981 at the earliest. But these sources now concede they could have been overoptimistic, since they were unaware of the Pakistanis' clandestine, top-speed efforts.

Although Pakistan has repeatedly denied it is working on a nuclear bomb, intelligence analysts dismiss these protestations as patently ridiculous. The heavily guarded uranium enrichment plant being built at Kahuta, 25 miles south of Islamabad, will give the Pakistanis enough fissionable material to build a bomb. All the experts agree it was only a matter of time. The alarming development is that the time period is being shortened drastically.

In Dr. Abdul Qadar Khan, the Pakistanis already have the technological expertise for nuclear capability. Khan is a Western-trained Pakistani who had access to the secret designs and technol-

ogy of a supersophisticated uranium enrichment plant in The Netherlands.

He allegedly stole some of the Dutch plant's blueprints, plus a list of contractors. Using dummy corporations, Pakistan has been quietly buying the materials needed for its enrichment plant on the Dutch model. Though evidence against Khan presented in international forums last year was overwhelming, Pakistan has refused even to admit he exists.

Under Khan's guidance, and with the help of 1979 Nobel Prize-winning physicist, Dr. Abdus Salam, the Pakistanis are so far along the nuclear trail that military-scientific teams have already been looking for suitable desert expanses for an underground test explosion.

When Pakistan does get its nuclear bomb, the world will enter a new and more dangerous era. A shaky dictatorship like Gen. Zia ul-Haq's, armed with a nuclear arsenal, is frightening enough. What makes the situation far worse is that Pakistan will likely share its nuclear know-how with even less responsible Arab nations, like the fanatic Gen. Muammar Qaddafi's Libya, which is a protector of terrorists and an implacable foe of Israel.

Intelligence sources explained that Pakistan is obligated to share its nuclear capability with Libya and Saudi Arabia, which have provided financial aid to its military and nuclear programs.

In 1977, the CIA secretly reported that Libya had promised to help Pakistan pay for a French nuclear reprocessing facility, but the United States was able to scotch the deal. Recent reports detail Libya's apparent financial involvement in the Pakistani uranium plant at Kahuta.

The Carter administration is concerned at the idea of someone like Qaddafi — or even the Palestine Liberation Organization — having an atomic bomb. A high-level task force, therefore, has been assigned to devise contingency plans for a Pakistani nuclear explosion. But my sources fear there really isn't much that can be done.